

CHAPTER VIII

ANALYSIS OF UMBUNDU DEVELOPMENT

THE question as to whether there is a Native African education is/21 discussed by Mr. H. S. Scott in the *Year Book of Education* 1938.¹ He notes that anthropologists have insufficiently described the educational processes of the various African peoples and that educationists have been at fault in disregarding indigenous methods. It is to be hoped that the foregoing description of individual development has shown clearly that there is an Umbundu education, the function of which is the integration of the individual in the on-going process of society—the 'moulding of individuals to the social norm'.²

In order better to understand this process and to determine in what way it may be adapted to meet present needs, it is now necessary to analyse Umbundu educational concepts and methods.

The theory of personality upon which the Ovimbundu act does 828● not seem to be entirely consistent. First, they act as though they believed that the child is born quite without character and that desirable traits have to be consciously formed. 'Children are generally ignorant until they have been taught by their relatives with whom they live.'³ On this premiss, they proceed to instil psychological attitudes in the young child and to teach him social usages. With the social psychologist they seem to 'regard childhood . . . as an opportunity which must be used in *learning* useful behaviour through social contact'.⁴ It is abundantly evident that they regard education as clearly a social process.

A baby is born pink and it is only when he turns dark at the sixth or eighth day that he shows the first indication of becoming a person (*omuntu*). He shows further promise in that direction with his first show of sense, but all through childhood he is, in a

¹ *The Year Book of Education* 1938 (Univ. of London, Inst. of Education, London: Evans Bros.), part x, pp. 639 ff.

² A. W. Hornell, 'An Outline of the Native Conception of Education in Africa', *Africa*, 1931, p. 147. This is quite close to Dewey's conception of education as 'transmission through communication'; cf. *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), chap. i.

³ *Supra*, p. 100.

⁴ F. H. Allport, *Social Psychology* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), p. 82.

828 sense, only a *potential* person. The permanency or stability of his personality (*unu*)¹ is only proven when he enters the state of adulthood at marriage. Then it is that he achieves true integration with society. Thus personality appears as a natural process of social integration.

828 On the other hand, the Umbundu belief in reincarnation² throws
775 responsibility for determination of personality back upon the ancestral spirits (*olosuku, olosande*) or upon the Spirit World or Fate (*Kalunga*). Clearly this belief cuts across the assumption that children are born without definite character whereby the responsibility belongs to the parents. Practically the seeming contradiction seems to be resolved as follows: *potentially* a child's character may be pre-determined by the spirits, but actually or at least until the potentialities become manifest, education may play an important role by providing the spiritual forces with suitable vessels. At about eight or nine years of age the character of the reincarnation, if any, becomes manifest, but the social and psychological education is supposed to be well along by that time. Provision of the vessels and their moulding is, therefore, at the same time an active and a passive function.

The psychological and social education of early childhood and also the imparting of skills all have to do with this active moulding function as the manuscripts quoted have shown. Many folk-tales and proverbs could also be quoted to show the Umbundu ideas with regard to personality.³

The more passive function of providing suitable vessels for the indwelling of the spiritual forces is no less important. Even among those who have discarded or are seeking to discard the beliefs of their fathers, this side of educational theory is still important. It 858 has greatly conditioned the outlook of the people. All observers 828 have remarked on the considerate treatment of children by the 775 Ovimbundu, on their recognition of personality in children and respect for it. In the narrative quoted this was seen in the mother's addressing her baby boy as 'little father'⁴ and in the first visitors

¹ *Unu* lit. the quality of being a person (*omunu*). The word is used for one's dominant bent, or his character.

² See *supra*, p. 102, n. 4.

³ I have identified about 100 Umbundu proverbs used in or having reference to education. About two-thirds of them deal with the period of early childhood. Their interest is about equally divided between the practical and the more philosophical aspects of life and education.

⁴ See *supra*, p. 90.

giving the baby the respectful terms of 'my wife' or 'my husband':¹ 828
 also in the comment of the narrator that 'parents recognize that it 775
 is proper to respect them (children)'² and in parents' reluctance to 858
 punish. It seems that this respectful treatment of children stems
 from belief in reincarnation, whereby a child is potentially an
 ancestor to be respected, deferred to, and even worshipped.

It is doubtful whether at present many children could be found
 who have really gone through the ceremonial for becoming media
 for guardian spirits of the family (*olosande*). The drift away from
 those observances has become a flood. Nevertheless respectful
 treatment of children remains, perhaps even undiminished, for it
 still has the force of customary behaviour if not the supernatural
 sanction. Indulgence on the part of the parents rarely if ever goes
 to the length of pampering. Belief that the child's character
 ultimately, or to a large extent, depends upon spiritual forces
 may lead parents to adopt a sort of fatalism, but that is hardly
 more serious than the effects of belief in the influence of heredity
 popularly held in the West. The Ovimbundu do not believe, as
 do the Zulus, for example, that a child is tainted at birth, needing
 radical treatment against the subsequent appearance of the taint.³
 With the Ovimbundu the development of personality is a process
 which may involve spiritual forces, but at all events requires
 careful human attention.

Education and Society

What then are the means by which the Ovimbundu develop the 861
 personalities of their children or mould them to the social norm? 867
 Their success indicates that they along with other 'so-called back-
 ward races have proved to be educationists . . . of no mean order'.⁴
 What, then, are their methods?

The educational process is the whole process of life and culture.
 School is society and society is school; there is no division between
 adult and child life. Education and life are one. This has been
 recognized as true for many African and other primitive societies.⁵

¹ *Supra*, p. 89.

² *Supra*, p. 104.

³ See Krige, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁴ W. D. Hambly, *Origins of Education among Primitive Peoples* (London: Macmillan, 1926), p. 401.

⁵ See the interesting analysis of M. Fortes, *Social and Psychological Aspects of Education in Taland*, p. 8 f. (Supplement to *Africa*, Oct. 1938); Margaret

861 This unity of 'the social sphere of adult and child' is a striking
 867 feature of the Umbundu educational process. A child learns by
 actual participation in adult activities. He participates as soon as
 he is able and in so far as he is able in all phases of adult life. A
 child begins early to assume responsibility both for himself and
 for as much regular 'adult activity' as his knowledge and ability
 may allow him to take on. This being the case, it is to be expected
 that all factors—physiological, psychological, social, and cultural—
 are so closely interrelated in the process of Umbundu education
 that their unity is almost organic.

Given this unitary social sphere, it is easy to understand that
 children always want to grow up. They are anxious to undertake
 full responsibility and full participation as early as they may. It has
 been pointed out that adults do not, or are expected not to, force
 the pace; they must not set tasks beyond the ability of the children
 in the actual stage of their development.¹ Normal development
 and normal behaviour are expected of children as a matter of
 course.² The possibility of aberrant behaviour³ does not seem
 regularly to enter parents' minds, much less their utterances, as is
 too often the case with us. Adult expectation of normal develop-
 [828] ment in children is perhaps best seen in the Umbundu concept of
 sense or intelligence (*olondunge*), something which every normal
 person is expected to have in some measure from the time of
 weaning. It is a relative term when applied to children and the
 young.⁴ Some adults have it in greater measure than others. But
 every person will have it according to the proverb:

[532]

Omulu loonyo, omu olondunge.

A rat with fur, a person with sense.

As every rat has fur, every person has sense.

861 Learning, as he does, in the real social and cultural situation
 153 of Umbundu life, the child develops genetically the behaviour

Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (New York: Morrow, 1928). Some writers have
 claimed this to be true of all the simpler cultures, e.g. Dewey, *op. cit.*, p. 8 f.,
 but cf. Margaret Mead, *Growing up in New Guinea* (New York: Morrow, 1930).
 Many of the African initiation rites seem to have been introduced from the
 outside and hence involve a distinct dichotomy, *vide* Sturt, *op. cit.*

¹ See *supra*, p. 110.² See Fortes' discussion of a similar attitude among the Tallensi, *op. cit.*,
 pp. 25-8.³ For the fatalistic attitude taken on failure to conform, see *supra*, p. 106.⁴ See *supra*, p. 100.

ANALYSIS OF UMBUNDU DEVELOPMENT

125

among the Ovimbundu is 'grudge-building'. This is probably fairly common and often eventuates either in sorcery or in suspicion of sorcery. There is special danger of this type of reaction between men and women who have an in-law relation to each other. This is probably a principal reason for the avoidance with which these relations are so carefully hedged and the respectful treatment mutually enjoined.¹ Grudges are sometimes inherited through several generations. According to folk-tales, children sometimes bear grudges against their parents for real or fancied ill treatment.²

Recognized outlets for anger in frankly 'extroverted' form are found in war and raiding parties, in the hunt, and in lawsuits. War is no longer resorted to but up to the present day anger still finds a recognized expression in actions at law. One of the commonest of such actions is the accusation of sorcery (*oku sunga owanga*) already touched upon above. Church councils and meetings have taken over some functions of the traditional courts of law and this is probably one reason for the decidedly stormy sessions which sometimes occur.

The importance of wit and humour as an outlet for anger has been recognized. 'The ability to turn one's anger into a jest goes with the trait of insight . . . and is sometimes appropriately called "the saving sense of humour".'³ That the Ovimbundu have this ability and use it often and to good advantage is very much in their favour. May not this be one indication of a considerable degree of insight which many observers have noted in the Umbundu character?⁴ I would not claim that the Ovimbundu have made any very remarkable attainments in the social control of anger: their achievements in that direction may be slight when compared to some of the more advanced peoples, as, for example, the Scandinavians, the Hollanders, or the English. What is remarkable, however, is that they have frankly recognized the necessity for such control more clearly than have some supposedly more advanced peoples.

Adjustments in family life are held to be resolutions of what are ultimately sex conflicts.⁵ Marital adjustments are of prime

¹ See *supra*, pp. 37 ff.

² Cf. *Journal of American Folk-Lore Society*, 1922, vol. 35, no. 6, p. 123 f.

³ Allport, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

⁴ Some writers have attributed to negroes a quality of 'insight' superior to that possessed by whites, cf. article 'Insight, &c.' in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Sept. 1938.

⁵ Allport, *op. cit.*, pp. 343-33.